

Testimony for Senate Hearing on Aging

My name is Diana Waugh. I reside in San Diego County, California. I am 60 years old.

I am here today to tell you about my personal experiences with the most viscous killer of Seniors- Clinical Depression and Suicide.

Stigma and ignorance about depression killed both my parents and almost killed me.

My mother killed herself at age 50. There were several events that happened in a row that should have been a clue that she was in trouble. However, the family didn't see it.

She was in menopause and seemed worried about getting old. She quit a job she loved and moved with my father from California to Montana in the middle of winter. My father shortly thereafter asked her for a divorce. Her beloved dog died, she had no job or friends since she was 20 miles away from her nearest neighbor. My normally happy and vivacious mother thought her life was over. She took a gun, put it in her mouth and pulled the trigger. The family was grief stricken, angry and ashamed. Suicide was considered an act of cowardice and not talked about.

It is estimated that 4.4 million Americans suffer the loss of a loved one to suicide. Suicide is like terrorism in a family- the result is devastating.

My father was never the same after mother's suicide. He killed himself twenty-five years later at age 79, also with a gun. He complained a lot about getting old. He had various aches and pains, was irritable and "cranky" and listless. He could not concentrate and was having trouble sleeping. He did not want to do anything. He quit the loves of his life, hunting and fishing. The family just accepted that this was part of getting old. He continuously complained about his symptoms to his doctor up until the week he pulled the trigger.

I know Dad would have thought it a weakness to talk about his feelings. He'd been taught that men should be strong. Even though he exhibited all the physical signs of depression, he was never diagnosed or treated for it.

I suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and went into a deep depression after my father's suicide. I was 52. I had been a dynamic energetic person with a successful career who could no longer concentrate and my job suffered. I was irritable, negative and listless. I did not want to do anything. I ached all over. I felt like my legs were encased in cement. Eventually I could not get out of bed or do even basic things to take care of myself. I lost my job and isolated from everyone. My life was empty and gray. I was ashamed, afraid and hopeless.

I wanted to kill myself but I remembered the pain and suffering I had gone through after both my parent's suicides and I did not want my family to suffer the same. I asked for help.

My sister took to me to a psychiatrist who diagnosed me with clinical major depression. He explained I had a brain disorder, and just like a diabetic, would probably need to take medication for the rest of my life. I was relieved. It wasn't that I was weak or had a moral defect; I had a disease of the brain.

My ignorance, fear, guilt and shame prevented me getting treatment earlier, As a result, I lost my job, my home and suffered health and dental problems that could have been avoided if I'd known more about my illness.

I still suffer from depression, but medication and therapy have helped me regain clearer thinking, a purpose and joy in my life again.

I now work for NAMI San Diego, an affiliate of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. Our goal is to erase the stigma attached to mental illness and to improve the lives of the mentally ill and those affected by it.

Many Seniors live at poverty level. Low fixed incomes and limitations on health care insurance coverage severely impacts access to mental health care for Seniors. The Medicare system only pays 50% of mental health services and has no Prescription drug coverage. Private insurances also discriminate against mental health coverage by allowing less dollar amount or number of visits than for any other disease.

Psychiatric drugs are often expensive and if there is a choice between taking a heart medicine or a drug to prevent depression, Seniors will often choose the heart medicine, not realizing the drug for depression is just as necessary to their lives.

I ask this committee to support the recommendations from the President's study on mental illness, allocate funds for education to stop stigma as well as research to put an end to this killer disease. Also Medicare must have Prescription drug coverage and insurance Parity implemented throughout the country.

Primary care physicians must be trained to recognize and treat depression. I suggest that depression screenings be done routinely as part of Doctors visits for people over 55.

I hope that my experiences have opened your eyes and hearts about depression and suicide in older adults.

We can no longer remain ignorant and apathetic about depression. The attitude that "everyone gets depressed -just get over it" helps Seniors take the pill overdose, slit their wrists, put their necks in a noose, put the plastic bag over their heads or pull the trigger.

Help us stop this vicious killer. Depression does not have to be part of growing old.